



Cotonou

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Sea Dancers of Ganvie Village on Stilts furiously row their vessel on Lake Ganvie.
Photo by Martina Boustani.



POST OF THE MONTH>>>

Cotonou



COUNTRY>>> Benin

CAPITAL>>> Porto-Novo (official capital; seat of government is Cotonou)

TOTAL AREA>>> 112,620 square kilometers

APPROXIMATE SIZE>>> Slightly smaller than Pennsylvania

GOVERNMENT>>> Republic

INDEPENDENCE>>> August 1, 1960 (from France)

POPULATION>>> 8 million

LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH>>> 53 years

LANGUAGES>>> French (official), Fon, Yoruba and tribal languages

CURRENCY>>> Communauté Financière Africaine franc (XOF)

PER CAPITA INCOME>>> \$1,100

IMPORT PARTNERS>>> China (46.6 percent), France (7.5 percent) and Thailand (6 percent)

EXPORT COMMODITIES>>> Cotton, cashews and shea butter

EXPORT PARTNERS>>> China (20.9 percent), Indonesia (7.7 percent) and India (7 percent)

INTERNET COUNTRY CODE>>> .bj

Nestled on West Africa's Gulf of Benin between Nigeria and Togo on the east and west, respectively, and Sahelian countries to the north, the Republic of Benin is a developing country notable for its political stability and commitment to democracy. The United States has an excellent relationship with Benin, especially since Benin's 1991 shift to democracy from a military government.

Ganvie fishermen cast their net.



The small but productive U.S. Mission offers its staff great responsibility, particularly entry-level officers and Foreign Service specialists, and has promotion opportunities. Reflecting this, five members of the embassy team (four officers and the Ambassador's office management specialist) were promoted in 2007.

Working conditions are challenging, however. Most Beninese are farmers and suffer from illiteracy, lack of

safe water and medical care, erratic electricity and dependence on one crop—cotton—for revenue.

Orphanage Assisted

Despite the challenges, the embassy's 200 team members excel in and out of the office. For instance, General Services Officer Neill G. Krost won a prestigious Secretary of State Award in 2007 for outstanding

PHOTOGRAPHS: (ABOVE): MARTINA BOUSTANE;
(OPPOSITE PAGE TOP): KOFFI A. BENOT;
(BOTTOM): DORA HALL



Above: Prior to a speech to the National Assembly, Ambassador Brown, center, met with Simon-Pierre Adovelande, MCA-Benin national coordinator at left; and Mathurin C. Nago, the National Assembly's president. **Left:** Visitors to the Pendjari Game Park find themselves among amazing natural wonders. From left, Javier Araujo Sr., Erika Araujo, Javier Araujo Jr., Gabriela Araujo, Alfredo Araujo, Emmanuel Sika, Rosalind Sika and Dan Hall.

volunteerism. He worked hard to improve the welfare of 250 children at the Abomey orphanage, which is four hours from Cotonou. Krost organized the diplomatic and expatriate communities for a first annual Christmas drive and delivered a large truckload of clothing, books, toys and furniture to the orphanage. He also persuaded the mayor of Abomey to provide electricity and water to the facility. Krost and the orphanage successfully wrote a proposal for the Ambassador's Self-Help Program to fund the construction

of a new dining/multipurpose room. He also developed a long-term business plan for the orphanage, created a Web site and raised \$20,000 to fund various improvement projects.

Friendly People

Benin's people are friendly, and the country is beautiful, offering good food and numerous attractive tourist possibilities. One of the most popular tourist attractions is the lake village of Ganvié—"the Venice of Africa." Built on stilts, it was established in the 16th and 17th centuries by the Tofinu people to protect themselves from slaving raids.

The city of Abomey, meanwhile, is a unique reminder of a vanished kingdom. From 1625 to 1900, a succession of 12 kings ruled the Kingdom of Abomey, and all but one building their palaces within the same area. These Royal Palaces of Abomey are on the United Nations' list of World Heritage sites.

The quiet historical city of Ouidah is unique for its association with the slave trade. Ouidah has a memorial to those enslaved, and there are also places of interest connected with the Voodoo religion,



English International School children and nurse Nana Yao, far right, pay a visit to the Slave Memorial in Ouidah.

which originated in Benin. These include the Temple of the Python and the Maison de Brésil, a museum that displays works showcasing Voodoo culture and the African Diaspora. The Sacred Forest of Kpassè Zoun has huge ancient trees, sculptures and woodcarvings that represent Voodoo deities.

Near Cotonou is Porto-Novo, which boasts a number of attractions, including the first museum established in Benin, the Ethnographic Museum. This museum contains cultural artifacts from all over the country, many connected with Porto-Novo's history, and has a superb collection of ritual masks, musical instruments and traditional tools.

For sports and leisure, Americans enjoy playing softball on Saturday mornings in Cotonou at the Marina hotel, which has outdoor swimming pools, floodlit tennis courts, a playground, a nine-hole golf course, beach volleyball and a soccer field. Afternoons of volleyball and barbecues are regularly scheduled at the embassy. Cotonou boasts two horseback riding clubs, and children's soccer and tennis are offered at the Club of the Nations.

Many Activities

At post, monthly and biweekly events include the Women's Book Club, a Ladies' Dining Night Out, Thank Goodness It's Friday events, Thursday evening Jazz Club, Sunday morning progressive brunches and movie nights. The American Cultural Center regularly organizes cultural events and seminars for the American and Beninese populations, members of civil society and journalists.

The post's community liaison office organizes city-orientation tours for newcomers to shopping centers, important sites and the

popular Dantopka Market, one of the three largest markets in West Africa.

On weekends in Cotonou, a good place to relax is Fidjrosse beach, where you can find a free spot on the sand or rent a small hut-type shelter for the day. However, it is not safe to swim in the Atlantic Ocean here. Another popular destination in Cotonou is the Artisan's Village, where various vendors sell typical art from Benin and West Africa, including wood and metal sculpture, drums, woven and painted tapestries, and jewelry.

To address the lack of U.S.-accredited schools in Cotonou and ensure quality education for mission children, the mission is creating a "virtual school" to offer enrichment courses on subjects not in the middle and high school curricula in Cotonou. This enrichment program will provide families and students in grades 9–12 the tools and support to meet educational goals. The program, offered via the Internet, uses course management applications, multimedia resources and videoconferencing.

Programs Make a Difference

The U.S.-Benin partnership involves such shared goals as investing in people; fostering economic growth and development; combating corruption, trafficking in drugs and people, and terrorism; protecting human rights; and promoting regional stability. U.S. programs in Benin include those of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, U.S. Agency for International Development, Peace Corps, Departments of State and Defense, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and African Development Foundation.



Above: Peace Corps volunteer Malaika Schiller (center, with microphone) conducts an interactive presentation at the post's recent HIV/AIDS awareness seminar. **Left:** Foreign Service Nationals at the post's information technology training seminar include Systems Manager and Trainer Djosse Atchade, first row left.



tion criteria, principally for anticorruption efforts.

The United States trains members of the Beninese Armed Forces for regional peacekeeping missions and provides equipment. Its programs also focus on training BAF members for work with civil society, members of the press, civil authorities and institutions of government on peacekeeping and antiterrorism efforts.

40th Anniversary

The Peace Corps celebrates 40 uninterrupted years in Benin in 2008. The 98 volunteers support the U.S. goal of investing in people and the Millennium Development goals for education, health, community health and HIV/AIDS. Other Peace Corps program areas involve decentralization, development of the private sector and promoting information technology and gender equality.

Some volunteers have provided training in environmental protection and natural resource management. Others have improved local planning and management of community health development services, activities and projects. They have implemented latrine projects to improve village sanitation, trained more than 9,000 people and 2,500 service providers in AIDS education and prevention, and taught English to 7,586 secondary school students.

The Department's Self-Help, democracy and human rights, refugee and humanitarian assistance programs support grassroots projects, election observers, the fight against female genital mutilation, the publication of laws and anti-child-trafficking efforts. ■

USAID programs support the education and health sectors, promote democracy and gender equality and fight violence against women and child trafficking. The Ambassador's Girls Scholarship Program, conducted under the Africa Education Initiative, has provided 3,384 scholarships for underprivileged girls, especially orphans and those who are physically disabled or living with HIV/AIDS. In 2008–2009, the program will support 400 boys.

Earlier programs resulted in new laws to protect children, women and families. Anti-child-trafficking efforts led to the successful return of children to their families and creation of transit centers throughout Benin. Hundreds of civil society organizations have received assistance in fiscal management and procurement processes to strengthen decentralization and reduce corruption. Benin has been selected for the President's Malaria Initiative and the Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative.

The MCC developed the Millennium Challenge Account-Benin program by involving all elements of Benin's society. The five-year, \$307 million Benin Compact of October 2006 promotes access to markets and land and the financial and justice sectors. Benin's continued eligibility for MCC support depends on its meeting selec-

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